

‘STORIED’ IDENTITY: SANDRA CISNEROS’ THE HOUSE ON MANGO STREET (1985)

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ABSTRACT

A diasporic writer offers one a kaleidoscopic view of his/her mind and its concerns. The writings become a platform to reflect change, adaptation, settlement and a longing to establish one’s identity. The heart of the matter throbs with interesting paradoxes emerging from an unsettlement in settlement. W. B. Yeats evaluation, “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold” is also true in the case of people who are displaced because of crises in their own country and who try to settle in other countries for their livelihood. They now try to make a ‘center’ for themselves to seek a balance and also to create a psychological, social, cultural and sometimes linguistic space of their own. This space that they aim at rises above cartographic demarcations.

Sandra Cisneros, the Chicano Latina poet and novelist is one such writer who has made her mark in American literature. She has evolved as a meaningful writer through her poems and stories. Every Latino in one way or the other has tried to integrate into the American life but what remains important is the transition which means different things to different people. The binary forces of the ‘home’ land and the ‘homed’ land give rise to a feeling that moves between a longing to retrieve what is lost and eagerness and hope to secure an opportunity to grow in life. Sandra Cisneros’ works reflect this transcultural component and the double vision of belonging to two cultures. There is also a revolutionary potential that strives for recognition of ethnicity and identity. But what is interesting is that the identity that emerges from this transition is a blend of the old and the new. “Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, ... characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them” (Culler 1997:116).

Cisneros’ *The House on the Mango Street* is about one such character Esperanza; an adolescent who tries to understand her ‘suffering’ and tries to ‘make’ her fate. Through Esperanza; a Latina, Cisneros explores the pain and predicament, trials and tribulations and challenges that arise out of a dual identity. The character grows amidst the issues of rootlessness, gender, economic status and ethnicity. She moves into the house on the Mango Street with her family but never wishes to stay there and dreams of a house of her own. She voices out the stories of the other dwellers in the ‘house’ and in this process moulds her own sensibilities. As Culler (Ibid) has remarked “Stories give different and complex answers” and Cisneros writes a story about her story through the story of a young girl and thus the writer and her subject merge at one level.

The present paper attempts to explore these trajectories which move towards self-identity and self-discovery in an attempt to enrich one’s roots in a setting removed from home. Thus Cisneros’ story not only establishes her Latino background and identity but also rises above it to empower many such people who are trying to build their identities as immigrants.

KEYWORDS: Diaspora Identity Adaptation Empowerment

INTRODUCTION

A diasporic writer offers one a kaleidoscopic view of his/her mind and its concerns. The writings become a

platform to reflect change, adaptation, settlement and a longing to establish one's identity. The heart of the matter throbs with interesting paradoxes emerging from an unsettlement in settlement. W. B. Yeats evaluation, "Things fall apart; the center cannot hold" is also true in the case of people who are displaced because of crises in their own country and who try to settle in other countries for their livelihood. They now try to make a 'center' for themselves to seek a balance and also to create a psychological, social, cultural and sometimes linguistic space of their own defining hybridity and the third space. This space that they aim at is born from and rises above cartographic demarcations.

Sandra Cisneros, the Chicano Latina poet and novelist is one such writer who has made her mark in American literature. She has evolved as a meaningful writer through her poems and stories. Every Latino in one way or the other has tried to integrate into the American life but what remains important is the transition which means different things to different people. The binary forces of the 'home' land and the 'homed' land give rise to a feeling that moves between a longing to retrieve what is lost and eagerness and hope to secure an opportunity to grow in life. Sandra Cisneros' works reflect this trans-cultural component and the double vision of belonging to two cultures. There is also a revolutionary potential that strives for recognition of ethnicity and identity. But what is interesting is that the identity that emerges from this transition is a blend of the old and the new. "Literature has always been concerned with questions about identity, ... characters as they define themselves and are defined by various combinations of their past, the choices they make, and the social forces that act upon them" (Culler 1997:116). The present paper will explore the issue of identity in Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street*.

DISCUSSIONS

Cisneros' *The House on Mango Street* is about one such character Esperanza; an adolescent who tries to understand her 'suffering' and tries to 'make' her fate. Through Esperanza; a Latina, Cisneros explores the pain and predicament, trials and tribulations and challenges that arise out of a dual identity. The character grows amidst the issues of rootlessness, gender, economic status and ethnicity. She moves into the house on the Mango Street with her family but never wishes to stay there and dreams of a house of her own. She voices out the stories of the other dwellers in the 'house' and in this process moulds her own sensibilities. As Culler (Ibid) has remarked "Stories give different and complex answers" and Cisneros writes a story about her story through the story of a young girl and thus the writer and her subject merge at one level.

ESPERANZA'S DUAL IDENTITY

The House on Mango Street moves away from the traditional pattern of novel writing. Forty four vignettes are strung together and each bears a voice that means more than it says expressing stories of hope and despair. Among the characters there are Rachel and Lucy, sisters from Texas who are Esperanza's and her sister Nenny's best friends. At the funeral of Rachel's and Lucy's baby-sister in 'The Three Sisters' Esperanza meets their old aunts. One of them reads Esperanza's palm. She says to her,

Esperanza: When you leave you must remember to come back for the others. A circle, understand? You will always be Esperanza. You will always be Mango Street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are. Then I didn't know what to say. It was as if she could read my mind, as if she knew what I had wished for, and I felt ashamed for having made such a selfish wish. You must remember to come back. For the ones who cannot leave as easily as you. You will remember? She asked as if she was telling me. Yes, yes, I said a little confused. (105)

Cisneros merging with Esperanza very poignantly puts forth her own voice and intention through these words.

They tell us of her deep felt anguish to assert herself and her community. Her dual Mexican American heritage keeps returning throughout the novel. These words display her acknowledgement of her circumstances and an underlying desire to transcend them. The Mexican Americans have always experienced an identity crisis. Their contribution to the U.S army during the World War 1 and II has not given them a significant place in the country and despite their push for civil rights during the 1960s and 70s many still faced discrimination. Accommodating themselves into the mainstream American culture was one of the challenges. *The House on the Mango Street* was published in 1983 and the number of Mexicans who were allowed to immigrate was already limited. Those who had immigrated legally and those born in America continued to experience biases in American culture. As a result many Mexican Americans felt discriminated and failed in being upwardly mobile. *The House on the Mango Street* houses characters who are from the lower strata of the society. The barrio becomes a strong metaphor for the place of Mexican Americans in the American society. They suffer discrimination, poverty and their stories reveal their deep sense of insecurity and their desire to survive against all odds.

Sandra Cisneros achieves a special effect through the portrayal of her many characters. What is interesting to note is that the author establishes her identity through all the characters. They seem to be extensions of her own personality.

What really ends up as a literary expression is 'recognition', an awareness of the angst within and an eagerness to chisel it out to give it a shape. Cisneros' sensitivity towards being a Hispanic woman in a highly developed setting made her realize her place and she drew strength from a weakness of the society around her. Her retreat into herself as a person shows itself as a powerful personality in her literary works. She remarked, "Everyone seemed to have some communal knowledge which I did not have-My classmates were from the best schools in the country. They had been bred as fine hothouse flowers. I was a yellow weed among the city cracks." (Warrick 2010: 6))

But this 'yellow weed' showed forth its hue and tried to make its presence felt. Cisneros' imagination kept working towards a discovery of the self, a process which was both; centrifugal and centripetal in the sense that it was an attempt to help herself and others who shared her predicament. It is this imagination that explores her complex experience of being a poor young female Chicana in America. In the words of Sylvia Plath,

What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination.... If I sit still and don't do anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine." (Plath 1958: 272)

Cisneros shared a similar angst and her new found voice presented itself in *The House on Mango Street*. Esperanza doesn't really like the house but there is no way out and so she begins to understand each of the characters who occupy the house and their feelings. Thus the stories of hope and longing unfold taking us into their worlds and make the novel a Bildungsroman.

The question of identity is a complicated one because it means many things which define it. An identity of the self includes both what one is factually that is in terms of race, country, place etc. and the other is in terms of what one is for the world in terms of one's personality and one's place in the society. So one is naturally given and one is 'taken'. But when the former becomes a detriment to the latter, the issues of proving one's 'self' come to the fore. Sandra Cisneros does this through her efforts of establishing her 'identities' through Esperanza and hers through the other characters in the stories. Apart from these two there are another two dimensions of identity according to Culler:

The third, combining the individual and the made, emphasizes the changing nature of a self, which becomes what it is through its particular acts. Finally, the combination of the social and the made stresses that I become what I am through the various subject positions I occupy, as a boss rather than a worker, rich rather than poor (Culler: 114).

Sandra Cisneros' characters exhibit all these nuances and the deceptively simple language brings doesn't fail in bringing us closer to the tales of their hearts.

ESPERANZA BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The novel shows the rite of passage of Esperanza from adolescence to youth. She has no particular problems with her family but it is clear that their economic condition disturbs her. She wishes to be independent right from that young age and she says "I know, I had to have a house" (5). All the characters in the stories have this in common- an eagerness to raise their economic standards.

Between two worlds, the dichotomized voice of Cisneros tries to express the tension through her characters and their longing for a lost place and a security in their present status. This is the thread running through many of the stories which gathers the fears, anxieties, hopes and dreams of the characters. Be it 'Geraldo with No Last Name', Alicia who waits to return to her royal lineage, Louies' cousin Marin, or Esperanza herself wait for something to happen to their lives so that they can be noticed and recognized as human beings. Away from their homeland, they try to assimilate into the American culture but find it very difficult physically, financially and also emotionally.

Esperanza in spite of being a young girl displays a peculiar sensitivity to her state and surroundings and tries to read the world around her. She herself seems to wait for that opportune moment to prove herself. She waits for the "a house quiet as snow, a space for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem" (pg. 108). It seems Cisneros through Esperanza declares her intense wish and that of many others like her to seek freedom from the oppressive and poor neighborhood of the Mango House. Cisneros does exhibit a longing for her homeland but not as something she would like to return to. She seems to retain her 'Mexicanness' in America. The very fact she has written a novel in English and not Spanish show that she doesn't mind being called a pocho; a Mexican-American with little or no knowledge of Spanish. But she says "I think my work still has a distinctive voice that is uniquely mine- and that voice is one of a person speaking Spanish in English. By that I mean I write with the syntax and sensibility of Spanish ..." (*Q and A with Sandra Cisneros* pg. 4) Octavio Paz in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* aptly says "In every man there is the possibility of his being—or, to be more exact, of his becoming once again—another man (p. 28)" The geographical and linguistic barriers are crossed but the issues of identity continue to haunt and the tensions and frustrations play an important role in restructuring themselves to suit the new context.

Esperanza speaks to us offering us lives and their stories and thus seeks our empathy with them so that we can respect their struggle. Her mother says,

"I could have been somebody you know." She can speak two languages. She says "Esperanza, you go to school. Study hard. ... Shame is a bad thing, you know. It keeps you down. You want to know why I quit school?. Because I didn't have nice clothes. No clothes, but I had brains. (90-91)

Esperanza's mother displays the helplessness of their situation. But she holds some hope in Esperanza. Esperanza is always eager to rise above the sad circumstances of the barrio. She also visits Elenita the soothsayer who tries to understand the movement of the stars to show her clients their future. The irony of the situation strikes us at once and Esperanza's sole wish is to own a house. She says "What about a house. I say, because that's what I came for." (64) This feeling of insecurity is a dominant theme in the novel and almost everyone is searching for some anchor to hold on to in their lives. These feelings of instability, low self-esteem, aimlessness and a sense of worthlessness emerge from their loss of identity and create a vacuum and loneliness. This is when they try to connect themselves to their country, language and culture but at the same time they try to get used to the dominant language and culture as it holds a promise of growth

and economic improvement. But not all can do this like Mamacita in 'No Speak English' who exhibits a fear of English. She overcomes it by listening to and singing Spanish songs. Her husband insists "Speak English" but for her it is "No speak English" (78). She continues to long for her pink house in Mexico. Her husband paints their house pink but it can never be the pink house she has left behind and this "Push, pull. Push, pull." (77) goes on.

LANGUAGE AS A MARKER OF IDENTITY

Ambivalence in terms of language surfaces out many times in the novel. Cisneros uses language as a significant marker of identity. She uses many Spanish words throughout the novel. Walter Mignolo, remarks that this "bilanguaging" is "precisely the celebration of the crack in the global process between local histories and global designs"(250). He says that "Languaging is ... a way of life, engaging needs and desires to enact the politics and ethics of liberation" (265). This moving between languages also points towards an attitude that involves both; a retention of the past and an acceptance of the new thus paving a specific linguistic space. There is an interesting observation of Anzaldua. She says,

...for a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves – a language with terms that are neither español ni inglés, but both. (Anzaldua: 264)

The irony of the situation is that what seems to be their own is longer theirs and what is now theirs cannot be their own in the true sense and this hiatus is bridged by the two languages symbolizing both identity and power.

Esperanza displays a dislike towards her name. She says "In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting (10). Cisneros combines both sadness and waiting and 'waiting' of course has hope; an anticipation of something that might change the course of Esperanza's life. For Esperanza it also means a rebellion from suppression and conformity. It is also her grandmother's name and she was a strong woman but forced into marriage. Esperanza appreciates her strength but says "I have inherited her name but don't want to inherit her place by the window" (11). She says "At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something like silver (10-11). On one side she faces a challenge of her name being made fun of and on the other her name spells softness. She has to come to terms with this two- sidedness and this also is a projection of her fears and anxieties of her identity. It is as if she has to rebuild herself; a process which begins with her name. She says "I would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees" (11). Set between such polarities, Esperanza's personality is on its way to make its identity felt.

Meme's name in 'Meme Ortiz' is Juan but he prefers to be called Meme. His dog also has two names; one in English and one in Spanish. Esperanza's cousin Rachel has three names "...two first names...one in English and one in Spanish..." (35). We also meet Geraldo in 'Geraldo No Last Name' who dies without a 'name'. Cisneros very poignantly shows us the misery and grief attached to people who come away from their own country and die 'nameless' in another. Marin loves to dance. She goes to all those dances. Uptown. ...And he was just someone she danced with. ...That's the story." (65) Geraldo dies in a 'hit and run'. "Once to the hospital twice to the police. No address. No name. Nothing in his pockets. Ain't it a shame. (66) For Marin he was just a 'somebody' but she is with him at the hospital at 'three a.m'. Cisneros connects the two with the thread of humanity and finally we leave Geraldo. "His name was Geraldo. And his

home is in another country. The ones he left behind are far away will wonder, shrug, remember. Geraldo--- he went north... we never heard from him again.” (66). These are the stories that travel into Esperanza’s mind to settle and unsettle ideas about the lives of the people around her.

‘SHAME’ AND IDENTITY

‘Shame’ is one of the aspects that the poor migrants and immigrants share and are sensitive to. It becomes part of their identity crisis. The poor lives they are forced to lead in a country which they strive to make their own results in an inferiority complex. Esperanza’s mother says “Shame is a bad thing you know. It keeps you down. (89) Cisneros describes Geraldo as “Just another brazer who didn’t speak English....You know the kind. The ones who always look ashamed” (65). In ‘Chanclas’ we find Esperanza “...wearing the new dress, pink and white with stripes and new underclothes and new socks and the old saddle shoes that I wear to school brown and white, the kind I get every September because they last long...My feet scuffed and round, and the heels all crooked that look dumb with this dress, so I just sit.”(46)

Her dress is new but her shoes are old and stop her from being herself. This is also a result of their economically impoverished life. Shame arises from the sense of being poor, being Chicano, sometimes of being female, of being insecure and this finally ends in the feeling of being ‘Born Bad’. In ‘A Rice Sandwich’ we witness Esperanza’s struggle to overcome the embarrassment of poverty. In ‘Those who Don’t’, Esperanza observes “All brown all around we are safe. But watch us drive into a neighborhood of another color and our knees go shakity-shake and our car windows get rolled up tight and our eyes look straight. Yeah. That is how it goes and goes (28). We find in these words the trauma of being marginalized and the continuity in the words “goes and goes’ strikes us.

The barrio is a microcosmic representation of Latinos in America. The stories it carries are sometimes funny and most of the times moving and tragic. It is as if Cisneros plants Esperanza there as an ‘eye’ that watches and assimilates the ongoing drama of human life. The Hispanic Americans try to forge their lives within the American culture. Their feelings of shame are quite human but what is striking is their will to move on and with it is a search for an identity. In many a way it is this shame that makes one search for a firmer landing in life. The traumatic experiences of the people in the barrio are put forth so as to make sense and then they are given a meaning that can be realized on a higher plane. In the words of Eden Torres:

...for the third space mestiza/os this sense of shame and guilt not only comes from not being part of the dominant social order(s) but also comes from not being part of one of their many races and/ or cultures...Thus third space mestizas/os must turn inwardly and search their inner self because only then they unveil the melancholia, shame and disgust they carry within, and this inner search becomes form of great strength. (Pedraza:32)

Esperanza in ‘Beautiful and Cruel’ says “I have begun my own quiet war. Simple. Sure. I am the one who leaves the table like a man, without putting back the chair or picking up the plate.” (89) Her poem says it all,

I want to be

Like the waves on the sea,

Like the clouds in the wind,

But I’m me,

One day I’ll jump

out of my skin.

I'll shake the sky

Like a hundred violins. (60-61)

These lines show her both as a Mexican and a female growing up in a barrio. *The House on Mango Street* is dedicated to women---a las Mujeres. The society that Esperanza lives in is basically a male-dominated one and Cisneros explores the dynamics of women's lives in this it. The women are bound by economic and social constraints and rarely have an opportunity to express themselves. Esperanza's mother is typical of the women in Latin American communities. She could not really prove herself in life but wishes that her daughters get educated so that they can break this cycle of subjugation to which she was subjected to. Esperanza is portrayed as a bold girl who is all set to experiment with the non-traditional roles of women in her community.

WOMANHOOD AND IDENTITY

The themes of womanhood keep ringing throughout the novel and that of the single mothers stands out. In 'There was an Old Woman She had so many Children She didn't Know What to Do', we witness an abandoned wife with her unruly children. In 'Linoleum Roses' Sally has to struggle against a jealous and domineering husband. Minerva in Minerva Writes Poems is "always sad like a house on fire" (84). She is of Esperanza's age but already married with two kids and a husband who has left her. Rafael in 'Rafaela who Drinks Coconut & Papaya Juice on Tuesdays', "...gets locked inside because her husband is afraid Rafaela will run away since she is too beautiful to look at" (79). Rafaela stands as a symbol of the inner world of the women in Mango Street and she shows how they are bound by home and family. The three sisters in 'The Three Sisters' are Lucy and Rachel's aunts and they perceive Esperanza's strong-willed nature and they foreground her future endeavors of success and liberation. They are the ones who ask her to 'return' to the people who she will leave behind. They tell her "You will always be Mango street. You can't erase what you know. You can't forget who you are (105). Esperanza's personality is shaped by witnessing such people in the barrio but they only make her stronger in her thinking processes and help her to decide to rise above the conditions in the barrio.

'WAITING' AS A METAPHOR OF IDENTITY

In 'Those who Don't', Esperanza seeks to liberate herself from this cycle of "goes and goes"(28) In 'Bums in the Attic' Esperanza says "One day I'll own my house but I won't forget who I am or where I come from" (87). All the events in the novel finally propel her desire of having a house of her own. Recognizing her condition and waiting for a breakthrough to assert herself and help others like her becomes the goal of her life. Thus 'waiting' also becomes a metaphor of identity. We understand that everyone 'waits' for something to change their lives including Esperanza. Marin in Marin waits to go to Puerto Rico to marry her boyfriend. She sells 'Avon' to get some money but is waiting for a 'real job' downtown because "...that's where you always get to look beautiful and get to wear nice clothes and can meet someone in the subway who might marry you and take you to live in a big house far away" (26) Alicia in 'Alicia who Sees Mice' has lost her mother and takes care of her siblings and waits to complete her college studies. She sees 'mice' everywhere and she waits to get rid of them. The mice in the story are a symbol of poverty which is an all pervading theme in all the stories. Rosa Vargas in 'There was an Old Woman She had so many Children She didn't know What to Do' waits not just for husband who has left her but also to know how he could do so! All of them in a way are as Esperanza observes in Marin "... are waiting for a car to stop, a star to fall, someone to change her life." (27)

Life is difficult and many things are learnt the hard way, Esperanza, Nenny, Lucy and Rachel discover the dangers

behind acting fashionable. They receive used shoes from one of the families and they feel like ‘Cinderellas’ for that day and strut around until a homeless man tries to sexually exploit them. These experiments in womanhood feed Esperanza’s mind with experiences that encourage her to think of self-identity. This is what fuels her longing to have a house of her own which connotatively means physical, emotional and financial security and a sense of belonging which she misses in her environs.

‘HOUSE’: A METAPHOR FOR ETHNIC IDENTITY IN A MULTICULTURAL SETTING

The ‘house’ thus becomes an all pervasive metaphor in the novel. It has an ethnic identity in the multicultural setting of the United States. One of the vignettes is titled ‘A House of My Own’ says, ‘Not a flat. Not an apartment in back. Not a man’s house. Not a daddy’s. A house all my own...Only a house quite as snow, a pace for myself to go, clean as paper before the poem’ (108).

What we find is a search for a ‘house’ in a multicultural setting. Lost and longing many like Esperanza search for such ‘houses’ and Cisneros expresses the angst of such souls. These feelings speak just not of individuals but of communities who have been victims of conquest, colonization, dislocation and marginalization. It seems that she is recreating her own past experiences. Born to a Mexican father and a Mexican American mother, Cisneros was the only daughter of seven children. Economically unsound, the family moved the ghetto neighborhood of Chicago and Mexico. It seems as if the sense of displacement she must have experienced is also faced by Esperanza. *The House on Mango Street* which won a ‘Before Columbus American Book Award’ in 1985 essentially portrays the race-class-gender paradigm that defines the Hispanic experience in the United States. With it are associated alienation, loneliness, change and transformation. Trying to root oneself in a foreign soil and trying to assimilate is one level and another is trying not to lose one’s own identity is another. The tension gives itself an expression and a projection.

The House on Mango Street in a way evades a specific definition of its structure because it forces us to ask whether it is a novel, a collection of short-stories, an autobiography, and poetic prose. The forty four vignettes stand independently but yet are together displaying a sense of unity in diversity. In spite of the non-linear structure there is an underlying coherence and they all progress and culminate to form one whole. The surreal and fragmentary quality of the stories also becomes a symbol of the Hispanic experience in a setting not its own. The brevity of expression is very striking. It reminds one of Hemingway’s words:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway *Death in the Afternoon* see Works Cited)

So it seems to be an art built out of adversity or to give an expression to adversity. Just like Esperanza’s identity is not easy to define, the stories also begin nowhere and end nowhere displaying a disjunctive nature. But Esperanza takes it all and evolves to be a braver and an ambitious girl towards the end. Cisneros’ attempts to express her sense of displacement and her first attempt is that of a story that holds so many more stories. According to Venetia June, ‘Story-telling is the pathway for discussing oppositional historical pasts, as well as a way to create a collective identity that is “whole”. Personal narratives become a space where third space mestizas/os can de-colonize history, and ultimately deconstruct otherness’ (Pedraza: 44).

This very act of sharing experiences through a story is a way of revisiting history to reconstruct it and make space for themselves in it. So ‘...in order to heal, they must reconstruct a history that tells their story’ (30) As part of this

endeavor Cisneros creates a poignant story *Four Skinny Trees* in which we witness four skinny trees and Esperanza says "...with skinny necks and pointed elbows like mine. Four who do not belong here but are here. (74) These words reveal a consciousness that is both historical and psychological. Anzaldua says,

My stories are acts...every time they are spoken to aloud or read silently. The work has an identity: it is a 'who' or 'what' and contains the presences of persons...Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the validation of humans: that is it makes people hopeful, happy, secure and it can have negative effects as well, which propel one towards a search for validation (Pedraza: 45).

Cisneros through the character of Esperanza takes us very close to such feelings and makes a symbol of a journey towards self-discovery. 'The Four Skinny Trees' help her look within herself. The ambivalence of being 'here' and 'there' only increases the strength of the trees which they 'secretly' build within themselves. In the same story she says, 'Their strength is secret. They send ferocious roots beneath the ground. They grow up and they grow down and grab the earth between their hairy toes and bite the sky with violent teeth and never quit their anger. This is how they keep' (74).

The 'anger' being expressed here is the force of the mind to accept and resist the ambivalence and this is being converted into a form of social action. Thus the book and its author become agents of social change. Seeking the liberating apparatus of the metaphor of the 'house' Cisneros drives home the point that it is identity that drives all human actions. It is important to realize it not just for the sake of the self but the community as a whole. Esperanza in 'The Four Skinny Trees' further says,

Let one forget his reason for being, they'd all droop like tulips in a glass, each with their arms around the other. Keep, keep, keep the trees say when I sleep. They teach. When I am too sad to keep keeping, when I am a tiny thing against so many bricks, then it is I look at trees. When there is nothing to look at on this street. Four who grew despite concrete. Four who reach and do not forget to reach. Four whose only reason is to be and be. (74-75)

Esperanza's character thus matures through the stories and we find her resilient throughout the pain and trauma she experiences in the process of self-discovery. From the fragmentation of the self she travels towards being a fuller personality. These words try to demystify the ideas of 'otherness'.

Esperanza says in 'Mango says Goodbye Sometimes' "I like to tell stories. I am going to tell you a story about a girl who didn't want to belong" (109). It is an assertion of a young girl who is all set to find herself in an uninviting world but as she has already declared, like the 'trees' she will 'be'. The stories help her in molding herself so that she can move on leaving the path for many others to follow her. In the words of Venetia June, 'Personal narratives are discursive sites where individuals can share their experiences and ideas with the collective group and this sharing of experiences can be cathartic for the writer and also empowering for the reader' (Pedraza:35).

CONCLUSIONS: ESPERANZA'S 'SELF' AND THE REDEFINITION OF IDENTITY

'*The House on Mango Street*' cannot really hold her, says Esperanza. It will set her free(110). Thus the house is not a material symbol but represents triumph and transcendence. Cisneros makes Esperanza's voice a voice of interrogation, determination, tenacity and hope of a Chicano girl trying to make place for herself without relinquishing her sense of 'self'. The description of *The House on Mango Street* which "...is small and red with tight steps in front and windows so small you'd think they were holding their breath" (4) is so symbolic of the struggle it takes to be one among the marginalized. But nothing can really stop striving Esperanza. She has a sense of place that is her place and the place

others live in. Many try to describe the house in the stories. A nun thinks that Esperanza lives in "...a row of three flats, the ones even the raggedy men are ashamed to go into" (45). But Esperanza has never 'lived' in these houses that have in a way imprisoned women but she has accepted Mango Street with all its borders and demarcations. But she is determined and certain that she can bridge her with her community through the act of story-telling. She says: I put it down on paper and then the ghost does not ache so much. She does not hold me with both arms. She sets me free (110). So what Esperanza intends to put on paper and Cisneros has already put on paper have the capacity to 'free' many like her.

Esperanza also has role-models. There are those who advise her that she has to escape the bonds of patriarchy but return to safeguard her cultural and communal interests. Minerva in 'Minerva Writes Poems' despite being harassed by an abusive husband writes poetry and reads them out to Esperanza and she also reads Esperanza's poems. Aunt Lupe educates her about the importance of writing and tells her that writing will pave way for freedom. Alicia shows her how she can balance family and her university studies and she is the one who tells her that she is Mango Street. Esperanza is influenced by these people and is inspired to understand that identity is not just for the self but also for others. Esperanza has to experience many rites of passage for her to evolve as a complete person. She also experiences a loss of innocence in the story titled 'The Family of Little Feet' and in the 'Red Clowns' she faces sexual assault. But she emerges more matured out of it all. In spite of being marginalized by race, gender and class she tells her story and goes ahead with a sense of purpose. She says,

One day I will pack my bags of books and paper. One day I will say goodbye to Mango. I am too strong for her to keep me here forever. One day I will go away. Friends and neighbors will say, what happened to Esperanza? They will not know I have gone away to come back. For the ones I left behind. For the ones who cannot out (110).

Standing on the threshold of a deeper realization of life's goal, Esperanza pronounces her destiny. Her 'bags of books and paper' are symbols of her growth and knowledge that she will procure in the future. Ordinary people and ordinary lives try to find a place for themselves through a silent struggle. They are like branches of a common tree. When even a simple assertion becomes a challenge, the voice tries to break itself from the barriers of country, class, color and gender and this singled out voice when heard loud and clear echoes the other many voices of the other many migrants from other countries. Thus the process of story-telling gathers prominence as it has been shaped by history. Cisneros says as a response to the question as why the book is being widely taught in American schools...

The book is being taught because it is telling a story that has spiritual resonance at this time in history. It is serving a need, it is doing its healing, it is transmitting light, but I was just the conduit for that light, not the source. I am fortunate and blessed to be the flute, but I recognize and acknowledge I am not the music (N.A 2009: 5).

Finally we understand that we are our own definers. To truly liberate oneself one has to get connected to the inner self to comprehend the spiritual knowledge that is universal. Like death grief is also unique-it has its universal elements. Thus '*The House on Mango Street*' transforms experiences through a story to heal, to share and most importantly to empower.

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